



## On the Purpose of 'Merit' in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas

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I aim in this essay chiefly to provide an adequate answer to the following question: why does Thomas Aquinas affirm the theological notion of 'merit'?

On the face of it, the answer to this question appears simple. Conditioned by Reformation debates, we are apt to think that merit-talk must be designed primarily to advance a set of claims about the dignity and achievement of the human person. By 'meritorious' action, a person establishes a right to spiritual reward from God; the affirmation of merit before God would thus testify to the ability of the person to contribute in a meaningful way to his or her own salvation. While Aquinas throughout his career agrees that human beings do contribute by their actions to their own salvation, in this article I shall argue that by the time of the *Summa theologiae* this aspect of merit-talk has receded to secondary importance. Rather, the principal focus of the mature discussion of merit lies elsewhere, in the depiction of the God who is revealed in striking fashion through the salvation of human beings. By the time of the *Summa theologiae*, the doctrine of merit is primarily designed to allow Thomas Aquinas to speak most appropriately about God.<sup>1</sup>

1. In an article entitled "John Calvin and Condign Merit," to appear in the *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* (1992), I have examined in some detail the principal

The article falls into three distinct parts. First, I will delineate the main contours of Thomas's mature discussion of 'merit' in the *Summa*, here noting the chief differences between this analysis and that offered much earlier by Thomas in the *Scriptum* on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Then, I shall try to account for these differences, paying particularly close attention to the developments between the *Scriptum* and the *Summa* in Thomas's understanding of grace, as well as in his sense of the purpose of God's creating and redeeming. Finally, I shall make some wholly tentative observations about the originality of the mature Thomas's treatment of merit, especially as this pertains to my claim about the principal purpose of merit-talk in the *Summa*. The careful examination of Thomas's construction of the mature teaching on merit will concomitantly shed light on Thomas's theological procedure, and so suggest, in turn, the general shape of a responsible reading of his theological work.

### DIFFERENCES IN THOMAS'S DISCUSSIONS OF 'MERIT'

While there are numerous references in passing to 'merit' throughout the Thomistic corpus, Thomas has provided us with extensive analyses of 'merit' in only two of his works, conveniently located, however, near the beginning and near the end of his theological career.<sup>2</sup> As we would expect, the treatments of merit in the early *Scriptum* and in the later *Summa* share a number of features. In both, human existence is viewed in terms of a 'journey' which begins in the conversion from sin to grace, runs through the morally good and graced actions that are pleasing to God and bring one closer to God,

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objections raised by Luther and Calvin to the Catholic affirmation of merit. I have also argued that despite his polemic against merit, Calvin in fact approximated, especially in his analysis of sanctification, a teaching on condign merit as found in the later Aquinas.

2. The discussion of merit in the early (1252–1256) *Scriptum* on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard is found in 2.27.1.3–6. I have used the edition of P. Mandonnet and M. F. Moos (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929–1947). Thomas considers merit in the *Summa theologiae* (1266–1273) in the final question of the *prima secundae*, 1–2.114. I have used the version in the Leonine edition of the *Opera Omnia* (Rome, 1882– ).

and, culminates, in the next life, in the beatifying vision of God. The *Scriptum* and the *Summa* similarly agree about the principal rewards of the actions done in grace: eternal life itself; and an increase in the habitual grace that is required to perform acts pleasing to God.

Even more striking than the common elements, however, are the differences that distinguish the earlier and the later accounts of merit. The *Summa*'s discussion of merit differs in two main ways from the *Scriptum*'s. The first emerges in Thomas's discussions of the possibility of merit.<sup>3</sup> In both the *Scriptum* and the *Summa*, Thomas demonstrates a keen sense of the difficulties involved in affirming merit. 'Merit' means to put another in one's debt. But God cannot be a debtor to anyone, and so human merit before God would seem to be excluded.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, merit presupposes an equality between what is done and what is given as reward. But nothing that people can do could possibly be equal to the reward of eternal life, thus again placing merit before God in doubt.<sup>5</sup> While the concerns about the possibility of merit remain the same, Thomas meets these concerns in each work in remarkably different ways. In the *Scriptum*, his basic move is to determine the type of justice that pertains to merit before God, arguing that it is not commutative justice (which would demand a quantitative equality between our act and God's reward), but rather distributive justice that is here in force—God renders to people who are equally deserving the same reward for their works.<sup>6</sup>

Thomas as well has a second move in the *Scriptum* to establish the possibility of the merit of eternal life, one to which he simply refers here in passing: the promise of God.<sup>7</sup> God has, in freedom, committed God to render the reward of eternal life for human merit. In this light, then, it is incorrect to speak of meritorious action placing God in a person's debt. Rather, by the promise, God has placed God

3. In the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas has devoted a separate article (1-2.114.1) to the consideration of the possibility of meriting before God. In the *Scriptum*, his comments on the possibility of merit occur in the course of his examination of the condign meriting of eternal life (*Super Sent.* 2.27.1.3).

4. *Super Sent.* 2.27.1.3 ob. 4; *Summa theologiae* 1-2.114.1 ob. 3.

5. *Super Sent.* 2.27.1.3 ob. 2; *Summa theologiae* 1-2.114.1, to which compare 1-2.114.3 ob. 3.

6. *Super Sent.* 2.27.1.3 sol., to which compare ad 1 and ad 4.

7. *Super Sent.* 2.27.1.3 ad 4.

in debt to God, and in rendering reward to us God is simply being faithful to God.

In the discussion of the possibility of merit in the *Summa*, on the other hand, Thomas's earlier preoccupation with the kind of justice that is involved in merit has simply fallen away. In its place, he now affirms a divine ordination as the ground of merit: merit before God is possible because God has ordained that acts done in grace will be meritorious of eternal life. By virtue of the divine ordination, the difficulties raised in the objections lose their force. Of course there is an infinite distance between God and people. But God's ordination simply bridges the gap: God has ordained that what human beings do, despite its intrinsic inferiority, will nevertheless be treated as deserving of eternal life.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the divine ordination removes the 'debtor' objection. In rewarding our action, God is being faithful to God's freely made ordination. To the extent that there is a 'debt' here, on the basis of the divine ordination the debt is owed by God to God.<sup>9</sup>

The divine ordination thus assumes in the *Summa* great significance. By explaining the possibility of meriting, it renders feasible the subsequent discussion of the particular rewards of this meriting. It is one thing, however, to detect importance; it is quite another to assert the precise meaning of this crucial term. Now a variety of meanings for 'ordination' have in fact been proposed in the literature on merit;<sup>10</sup> it will be of the utmost importance to my claim about

8. *Summa theologiae* 1–2.114.

9. *Summa theologiae* 1–2.114.1 ad 3.

10. In general, students of Aquinas's teaching about merit have tended either to construe the *Summa's divina ordinatio* too narrowly, restricting it to a single meaning, or to underplay its significance, failing to see that it is the foundation of the distinctive analysis of merit offered in the *Summa*. For examples of the former, see Otto H. Pesch, "Die Lehre vom 'Verdienst' als Problem für Theologie und Verkündigung," in *Wahrheit und Verkündigung: Festgabe M. Schmaus*, ed. Leo Scheffczyk et al. (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1967) 2:1904, which assimilates *ordinatio* too closely to the Scotist *acceptatio*; and B. Hamm, *Promissio, Pactum, Ordinatio* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1977), pp. 312–313, 334–336, which relates the divine ordination that makes merit possible to the inner teleology of grace. For an example of the latter error, see W. D. Lynn, *Christ's Redemptive Merit: The Nature of Its Causality According to St. Thomas* (Rome: Gregorian University, 1962). Lynn recognizes (e.g., p. 43) that the term '*ordinatio*' covers a wide range of meanings, but fails to recover all of these meanings or to accord *ordinatio* the prominence and centrality that it enjoys in the mature teaching.

the main purpose of merit-talk in the *Summa* to attain a greater familiarity with this concept. Still, at this stage in the investigation, we are simply not in position to grasp the full range of meaning of this term as used in the first article of the question on merit in the *Summa*; that must wait until later in this essay. For the moment, let it suffice to say that at an absolute minimum the 'ordination' that grounds merit in the *Summa* refers to the 'promise' that had figured momentarily in the related discussion in the *Scriptum*. We can 'merit'—that is, can deserve a reward from God—because God has freely determined to treat our actions done in grace as 'meritorious' of reward.

In addition to the enhanced prominence of the divine ordination, there is a second way in which the *Summa*'s treatment of merit differs from that in the *Scriptum*. Thomas's discussion of merit in the *Scriptum* is a rather straightforward account, that concentrates on the actual objects or rewards of merit. Hence, it is concerned to demonstrate in this distinction that by their good acts people can merit not only the end of the spiritual life, God, but the increase of grace and even the conversion of another person as well.<sup>11</sup> In the *Scriptum*, Thomas is not interested in telling us which features of the spiritual life, if any, elude merit. The only possible exception in the *Scriptum* is his discussion of conversion, the first entry into the state of grace: in this distinction, Thomas appears reluctant to concede that the human person can merit the first grace.<sup>12</sup> However, I believe that this is only an apparent exception to the claim that in the *Scriptum* Thomas deals only with the actual objects of merit. In this writing, Thomas affirms the *facere quod in se est*, according to which God grants grace to a sinner who by his or her freely initiated and performed actions tries to amend his or her life.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, although he stresses that congruent merit is an imperfect merit that falls short of merit in the strict sense—that is, falls short of the condign merit that is governed by justice—in this writing Thomas does admit that congruent merit is a real merit, and in fact he discusses the *facere* in terms of such a

11. Thomas considers the meriting of beatitude in *Super Sent.* 2.27.1 article 3, of the first entry into the state of grace in article 4, of the increase of grace in article 5, and for another in article 6.

12. *Super Sent.* 2.27.1.4.

13. See, for example, *Super Sent.* 1.48.1.3 sol. and ad 1, 2.4.1.3 sc., 2.27.1.4, and 2.28.1.3 ad 3.

congruent merit.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in his discussion of the merit of the first grace in the present distinction, all Thomas probably wants to do is to exclude the condign merit of first grace, while wishing us to understand that the sinner nevertheless does merit this grace congruently.<sup>15</sup>

The situation is rather different in the *Summa*. Thomas naturally enumerates in 1–2.114 the rewards that do fall under merit, and again tells us that people can merit the end of the spiritual life, as well as the increase of habitual grace and conversion for another.<sup>16</sup> But in the *Summa* Thomas is not content just to tell us which rewards Christians can merit by their acts. He also devotes considerable attention to telling us which aspects of the spiritual life cannot be merited through good action. Thus, for example, whatever hesitations he might have had on this question in the *Scriptum*, Thomas unequivocally rejects in *Summa theologiae* 1–2.114.5 any merit of the first grace. In keeping with his affirmation of gratuitous election to salvation, in this article Thomas stresses that conversion itself is worked freely by God alone, apart from any kind of merit of the sinner. Similarly, in the ninth article, Thomas argues for an unmerited grace of perseverance.

Thomas's attitude toward perseverance in the earlier *Scriptum* is difficult to document, precisely because he hardly discusses the question. However, it is most likely that his position in the earlier work is that the one who perseveres on the path to God is the one who acts freely in accordance with the inclination of the habitual grace received in justification; perseverance in grace is left, as it were, in the hands of the justified. In the *Summa*, on the other hand, perseverance is a free gift of God by which God applies a person to good action and keeps the person away from sin. The result of Thomas's inclusion of these unmerited graces of conversion and perseverance in his description

14. In *Super Sent.* 4.15.1.3, Thomas recalls the view that the disposition for grace is sometimes said to be congruently meritorious of that grace, but he adds that congruent merit is not really or properly 'merit'. In other texts (2.27.1.4 ad 4, 2.27.1.6), he reports that some theologians explicitly link the *facere* to congruent merit. Thomas does not indicate any disapproval of such a claim.

15. For the claim that Aquinas did in fact teach a congruent merit of the first grace in the *Scriptum*, see J. Rivière, "S. Thomas et le mérite 'de congruo'," *Revue des sciences religieuses* 7 (1927): 641–649.

16. Thomas treats the meriting of eternal life for those who possess grace in *Summa theologiae* 1–2.114 articles 2–3, the congruent merit of first grace for another in article 6, and the increase of habitual grace in article 8.

of merit is a more nuanced account. Their inclusion helps us to perceive the limits of meritorious action by bringing to our attention those features of spiritual existence that fall outside of merit. And, most significantly, this revision of his teaching on merit underscores the ultimate gratuity of salvation: that one gets into grace and then stays there is due to God's free decision to provide these graces to the person.

### REASONS FOR THE DIFFERENCES IN THOMAS'S DISCUSSIONS

Once we have described the chief differences between Thomas's two discussions of merit, the question naturally arises: why has Thomas revised his teaching in these ways?

Considerable progress in accounting for these differences will be made by recalling the immediate context of the discussions of merit. In both works, the discussion of merit comes in the course of the general discussion of grace. Thomas's understanding of grace had been significantly modified between the composition of these two works.<sup>17</sup> In the *Scriptum*, his teaching about grace is rather close to that of other thirteenth-century theologians. Grace is conceived exclusively as habitual grace; the need for grace is constituted principally by the 'ontological difference' between creatures and the God who is their beatifying end. Relatively little consideration is given to the problem of sin, thus making it possible to ascribe conversion and perseverance to human initiative.

By the time of the *Summa*, however, Thomas advanced a markedly different conception of grace. Greater sensitivity to the pervasive effects of sinfulness has led the mature Thomas to look as much at the healing, as at the elevating, function of grace.<sup>18</sup> Thomas had

17. For orientations to the developments in Aquinas on grace, see Henri Bouillard, *Conversion et grâce chez s. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Aubier, 1944); and Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. J. Patout Burns (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971).

18. This is apparent in the discussion of the need for grace in *Summa theologiae* 1-2.109. From the second article on, Thomas is very much concerned to show the dire effects of the fall and of sin in general. In the later articles of the question

meanwhile discovered a second form of grace, the grace of *auxilium*, to complement the earlier-affirmed habitual grace, the two forms of grace being equally involved in the healing and elevating of the human person. The developments in Thomas's thinking about grace are evident in what is arguably the single most important text in the treatise on grace, 1–2.111.2.

This passage neatly gathers up the insights of the preceding questions on grace while furthering the discussion by showing that grace as understood by the Thomas of the *Summa* can be interpreted in terms of the Augustinian categories of 'operative' and 'cooperative'. The corpus of this article is divided into two sections. In the second, shorter section, Thomas explains that his habitual grace can be both 'operative' and 'cooperative'.<sup>19</sup> Operative habitual grace is responsible for 'being', taken in both a moral and a supernatural sense. By operative habitual grace God both forgives the person's sin, and so grants the individual a new moral stature before God, and elevates the person to the supernatural level, orienting the person to God as to his or her beatifying end. 'Cooperative habitual grace', on the other hand, is responsible for 'operation'. While Thomas's meaning is somewhat obscure, it is likely that 'operation' here refers to an inclination or disposition to act. By cooperative habitual grace, the person who has been made pleasing to God is now disposed to act in the way conducive, both morally and supernaturally, to attaining eternal life.

The discussion of *auxilium* in terms of the traditional Augustinian categories in the first section of the corpus is more extensive, probably reflecting Thomas's own greater interest in working out the implications of his discovery of this form of grace.<sup>20</sup> Earlier in the treatise

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(especially 109.8–9), Thomas insists that the tendency to sin remains active even in the justified and must be overcome by subsequent healing graces.

19. *Summa theologiae* 1–2.111.2.

20. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, chapters 4–6; see also Mark D. Jordan, "The Transcendality of Goodness and the Human Will," in *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology*, ed. Scott D. MacDonald (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991). Jordan highlights Aquinas's use of an extra-Christian source, the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Eudemian Ethics*, in the refinement of his ideas about the interplay of divine and human causality, including in the construction of his mature teaching on grace (see pp. 138 ff., especially p. 148).



on grace, Thomas had argued for the need of a grace of *auxilium* to explain action. Habitual grace provides the capacity, the possibility, for morally correct and supernatural action. What is in potency to act does not move itself, but must be applied to its action by what is already in act. Thus, by the grace of *auxilium* God must realize the potential established by habitual grace, applying the possessor of such grace to act.<sup>21</sup> In the present article, by explaining that *auxilium* can as well be understood in terms of the distinction between 'operative' and 'cooperative', Thomas further specifies how God through *auxilium* applies individuals to their action.<sup>22</sup> Thomas begins this stage of his analysis by defining 'operative' and 'cooperative' as used of *auxilium*. In operative *auxilium*, the will is simply passive, moved by God to its appropriate act; in cooperative *auxilium*, the will is both passive and active, moved by God in such a way that it also moves itself. Thomas then relates these definitions of operative and cooperative *auxilia* to his treatment earlier in the *prima secundae* of the main stages of the complete human act.<sup>23</sup>

21. On the need for both forms of grace, see *Summa theologiae* 1–2.109 in general. For the claim that habitual grace provides the capacity (*virtus*) for morally correct and supernatural action, see 1–2.109.2. Thomas argues the need for divine assistance for human action to occur from the first article of that question. See as well 1–2.109.2 ad 1, where, employing the passage from the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Eudemian Ethics*, Thomas proposes the need for divine *auxilium* even in the mind healed of sin. Thomas repeats that such *auxilia* are required in the life of the justified in 1–2.109.9. Incidentally, habitual grace is first received at the end of a process initiated by an (operative) *auxilium*; see 1–2.109.6 corp. and ad 3, as well as 1–2.112.2 and 1–2.111.2. The sequence of graces is therefore this: an operative *auxilium* that works conversion; followed by the infusion of habitual grace, operative and cooperative, and the subsequent granting of further *auxilia*, operative and cooperative, which account for the realization of the potential provided by habitual grace.

22. *Summa theologiae* 1–2.111.2.

23. See *Summa theologiae* 1–2.6–17. At 1–2.111.2, Thomas offers a much-simplified version of the complete human action, speaking of the 'stages' of the act in terms of 'interior' and 'exterior'. I have squared Thomas's present usage with the earlier analysis of the human act. Given Thomas's example of operative *auxilium* in this essay, there is no particular difficulty with equating the present 'interior' act with the earlier-mentioned intending of the good. Similarly, the 'exterior' act of 1–2.111.2 at the least must cover external performance. The real problem is whether the choice of means is to be ascribed to operative or to cooperative *auxilium*. Is choice of means 'interior' or 'exterior'? Now, elsewhere in the *Summa* (e.g., 1.83.3; 1–2.13.1), choice of means is said to be the act of the *liberum arbitrium*. And, later in the present article,

Any complete human act can be divided into three main parts: first, there is the intention or willing of a good; then, there is the choice of the means to attaining that good; and, finally, there is the actual performance of the act. In the present text, the willing of the good is ascribed to operative *auxilium*: here, God moves the will to the intention of a good, and the will is simply passive. The other two parts of the human act are ascribed to cooperative *auxilium*. In the choice of the means and the execution of the act, God is active, moving the will in such a way that it also moves itself.

To a large extent, the new dimensions of the *Summa*'s teaching on grace provide the distinctive shape of Thomas's mature teaching on merit. On the one hand, the insistence in question 114 about what cannot be merited reveals Thomas's desire to be faithful to his newly attained insights on operative *auxilium*. In 111.2, Thomas is content to mention but a single instance of operative *auxilium*, that of conversion. In conversion to God, God moves the will and it is simply moved.<sup>24</sup> There are other instances where the will intends good as moved by God, instances covered by other operative *auxilia*. Willing the good stands at the beginning of every good human action. The good that is realized through discrete actions both approximates the ultimate Good that is God and brings the person closer to the ultimate Good. Subsequent to the entry into grace, which is worked by the operative *auxilium* of conversion, every time a person wills a good that is subordinate to the ultimate Good that is God, it is similarly as moved by an operative *auxilium*. Operative *auxilium* both initiates and sustains the journey to God in heaven, accounting for the successful completion of the journey to God. In a word, Thomas has complemented his teaching on the operative *auxilium* of conversion with the affirmation of the operative *auxilium* of perseverance—and,

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when speaking of cooperative habitual grace, Thomas ties *liberum arbitrium* closely to cooperative grace. The meritorious act proceeds from both (see also 1-2.114.1). Hence, in the present discussion of human activity, it is probable that choice of means comes under the 'exterior' act that is due to cooperative *auxilium*: in the choice of means, God moves us and we also move ourselves, and so merit. See also Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, pp. 135–136.

24. The point is repeated in *Summa theologiae* 1-2.112.2, where Thomas insists that there can be no preparation for the grace of *auxilium*. It is simply given by God, thus working the preparation required for the infusion of habitual grace.

indeed, he refers to the latter *auxilium* explicitly in the later articles of question 109.<sup>25</sup> He has subsequently incorporated this teaching on the operative graces of conversion and perseverance into the later question on merit. Neither conversion in the first place nor perseverance in the grace that is granted in conversion can fall under merit; they are, Thomas repeats in the question on merit, the pure gift of God.

The earlier questions on grace also contribute to the treatment on merit, on the other hand, in what might be termed a 'more constructive' manner. Read in isolation, one might suppose that their is a rather perturbing gap in Thomas's analysis in question 114. While Thomas talks here of the 'ordination' that makes merit possible, and describes both what can and cannot be merited, he nowhere indicates in the question what constitutes the action that is meritorious. In 111.2, however, Thomas has already performed this task. As Thomas reminds us in the heading to question 114, merit is the "effect of cooperative grace." Thus, in the earlier article Thomas has already disclosed the locus of merit. Merit arises in the correct choice of means and in their actual performance, both of which are facilitated by cooperative grace.

Yet grace does not stand on its own in the *Summa*. Thomas's teaching on grace in the *prima secundae* itself presupposes and builds on the earlier analysis of predestination and indeed on the account of God's purpose in creating and redeeming. That by the time of the *Summa* Thomas had to link his teaching on grace explicitly and consistently to an understanding of predestination is suggested by the preceding. In the *Scriptum*, there is no particular problem in explaining how a person gets grace in the first place. God has made grace available to all; to get this grace, all one must do is take the first step to God. Hence, human initiative stands at the beginning of the journey to God and human decisions are sufficient to explain why

25. See *Summa theologiae* 1–2.109.9–10. I have examined Thomas's teaching about perseverance in greater detail—and argued for its distinctiveness in the context of thirteenth-century theology—in "'Perseverance' in 13th-Century Theology: The Augustinian Contribution," *Augustinian Studies* 22 (1991): 125–140. I show there how Thomas's sophisticated system of graces has allowed him to portray with greater nuance the different ways in which God provides for the successful completion of the journey to God.

some come to possess grace. In the *Summa*, on the other hand, this reading of the entry into grace has been excluded. Apart from grace, apart from God's preparation for grace, all we can do is sin, which, at least to the mind of the later Aquinas, is not a satisfying 'occasion' for the granting of grace.

Why, then, does one person receive grace in the first place, while others go without grace? One receives grace as the wholly unmerited gift of God, granted by God to some in accordance with God's will. God works conversion from sin to grace in those who have been predestined to convert; the grace of conversion is thus the effect of God's predestining will.<sup>26</sup> In the light of an increased pessimism about human beings, however, Thomas had to extend the scope of God's predestining and so add to the graces that accomplish God's will. The grace of conversion brings healing from sin, but healing is never

26. See in general *Summa theologiae* 1-2.112.2-4. In articles 2 and 3, Thomas offers his radical reinterpretation of the familiar scholastic saying, "facientibus quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam". In article 2, he asks whether a person must be prepared for the infusion of grace. The answer is no if one is thinking of (operative) *auxilium*: that is simply given by God. But if one is thinking of habitual grace, the answer is yes. The 'matter' of the soul must be prepared for the reception of this formal perfection. Yet, Thomas adds, preparation for habitual grace is itself worked by God, by God's (operative) *auxilium* that disposes the person for the infusion of habitual grace. In the third article of this question, Thomas asks in effect about the connection between the two parts of the scholastic saying. Does God 'have' to give habitual grace to one disposed for it? Thomas refers here to the two perspectives from which preparation for grace can be viewed. As worked in the human person, the granting of grace need not follow preparation for grace: God is not necessitated by any creature. But, as worked in the human creature by God, the infusion of habitual grace will in fact follow the preparation for grace: God does not act idly. Hence, if God has worked the preparation for habitual grace by operative *auxilium*, it is precisely because God has intended to infuse habitual grace in the one so prepared. As Thomas says there, "intentio Dei deficere non potest." What God has ordained (*ordinatur*) will come to pass. In 1-2.112.4, Thomas adds that one person can have more habitual grace than another, because that person will have been more fully prepared for habitual grace by God's *auxilium*. The greater preparation through *auxilium* is itself due to God's greater 'care' for that person, to God's decision to grant that person a more intense possession of habitual grace. Thomas's teaching in this article has an even greater resonance once we recall that predestination of people to salvation expresses God's causal love. Thomas also discusses the preparation for habitual grace and the role of God's *auxilium* inspiring a person to good purpose in 1-2.109.6.

complete in this life.<sup>27</sup> The person who is renewed by grace remains subject to temptation, both from within and from without, and apart from God's free decision to maintain a person in grace—and the execution of this decision by grace, the grace of perseverance—the person will fall prey to temptation, that is, will sin. In this way Thomas undergirds his mature teaching on grace by asserting a predestination by God of some people to salvation, a predestination that accounts for both conversion and continuance in the state of grace. One reaches God in heaven in accordance with God's will.

Thomas's teaching about predestination, however, is not *ad hoc*, as if advanced merely on account of an increased pessimism and the enumeration of a multiplicity of graces bestowed by God. This analysis of predestination is of a piece with Thomas's most basic convictions about God and in particular about God's motive in creating and redeeming. God creates in order to communicate God's goodness outside of God. Each creature displays the divine nature by its nature, acts, and end in the way appropriate to it. The totality of creatures brought into being by God and sustained in their movements by God reflects as best it can the goodness that is God.<sup>28</sup> In creating different kinds of creatures with their appropriate ends, God has not acted haphazardly. Rather, the communication of goodness outside of God is structured in accordance with a plan formulated in the divine wisdom.<sup>29</sup> In his comments about the sapiential communication of divine goodness, Thomas frequently employs the language of ordination. God has "ordained" creatures to their appropriate ends, and executes this "ordination" in the working-out of divine providence.<sup>30</sup> Thomas speaks in a similar vein when he turns to the part of providence that

27. The point is repeated in *Summa theologiae* 1–2.109.8–10.

28. Thomas insists through the *prima pars* that God creates out of goodness and that what God creates reflects the divine goodness. See, for example, *Summa theologiae* 1.19.2.

29. See, for example, *Summa theologiae* 1.47.1–2; 1.44.3–4.

30. Thomas discusses providence in the *Summa* in 1.22. He defines providence as the *ratio* of the *ordo* in things to their ultimate end (the divine goodness) that exists in the divine mind (1.22.1,3). He uses the verb *ordinare* of divine providence in such texts as 1.22.4 (where it pertains to providence *ordinare res in finem*) and 1.23.1. Thomas draws a distinction between 'providence' and 'government'. Technically (as at 1.22.1 ad 2), 'providence' refers to the *ratio* established by God and that is in the divine mind; 'government' refers to the execution in the world of this plan. In

is 'predestination'.<sup>31</sup> In order to communicate the divine goodness in a special way, God has "ordained" human beings to come into the immediate presence of God and to share in God's own life and activity. God executes this ordination through the gifts of grace by which God brings the elect to their supernatural end.<sup>32</sup>

Just now, after this excursion into grace, predestination, and the sapiential communication of divine goodness, we are finally in position to return to the first difference noted between Thomas's early and later treatment of merit, namely, the later insistence on the 'divine ordination'. By his use of this term in explaining the possibility of merit, Thomas is, as it were, rewarding the attentive reader of the *Summa*. The first article of the question on merit cannot be read in isolation from what precedes it in the *Summa*. The consequence of such a disjointed reading would be the restriction of the 'ordination' to but a single meaning, and hence to miss Thomas's point. Once we recognize that this question is part of an integrated whole, and that it too assumes and builds on all that has come before, it is possible to see that the 'divine ordination' that grounds merit is rich in associations and in fact covers a wide range of meanings.

In a first approach to 1–2.114.1, all we were able to say of the divine ordination is that it included the promise of God to render reward for good action done in grace. Now we can say significantly more, and in the saying grasp the main purpose of the affirmation of merit in the *Summa*. 'Ordination' is a sapiential term. Its use in the present context brings us to the recognition that God has established the possibility of 'merit' precisely in order to display divine goodness through us and our salvation. What, then, does 'ordination' mean? It refers, in brief, to all the ways in which human existence, the call of human beings

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practice, however, Thomas uses the term 'providence' to cover the *ratio* and the execution of the plan for creatures established in divine providence.

31. Thomas considers the relation of providence and predestination in *Summa theologiae* 1.23.1,3.

32. Thomas employs the language of 'ordination' when speaking of predestination throughout *Summa theologiae* 1.23. See, for example, the bodies of articles 1 and 3. On the relation between predestination and grace, see 1.23.2 ad 4. In 1.23.3, Thomas states that predestination includes the will to confer grace and glory, that is, both the end of the spiritual journey (glory) and the means to that end (transformational grace).

to a higher destiny, and the movement of human beings to this end through their graced actions conspire to display the goodness of God outside of God. As voluntary agents, God has so constituted us that by our will and movements of will we imitate the willing of God in the way decided by God's wisdom.<sup>33</sup> In our salvation, people display in particular by the divine ordination the goods of both the divine mercy and the divine justice. As predestination, the divine ordination denotes God's loving call of people to share in God's own life.<sup>34</sup> As the promise that links our actions to God's reward, the ordination provides as well the possibility for the exercise of God's justice, of God rendering to us what we deserve for these acts.<sup>35</sup> Finally, again as

33. Recall *Summa theologiae* 1-2.114.1, where Thomas relates the *ordinatio* that grounds meriting to the "free choice" (*liberum arbitrium*) by which people move themselves to action. In 1-2.5.7, the fact that people are to come to heaven by their meritorious actions is expressly ascribed to the divine wisdom.

34. The teaching on predestination in *Summa theologiae* 1.23 assumes that on God's love in 1.20. In the earlier question, Thomas had differentiated God's love from human love. In both, 'love' means "to will good with respect to another." Yet our love is evoked by a good that is already present in another. God's love is causal, creative of good (1.20.2). God's love is responsible for the variety of goods in nature: God loves the better more in the sense that God has willed a greater good to some (1.20.4). Hence, that they both exist indicates that God loves both the nonrational animal and the human being. God has willed for each the good of being. That one exists as human indicates that God loves this being more, willing to it the greater good associated with being human. Thomas builds on this teaching on God's causal love in the discussion of predestination (1.23.4). All humans have been equal recipients of God's love to the extent that God's love creates them with the same nature and capacities by which they are capable of the good natural to their being. Yet those whom God loves more, those whom God has ordained to a greater destiny, have received an even greater good. God's special love for them infuses in them the grace, the effect of this love, that makes it possible to attain the special good that is life with God in heaven (1.23.4 corp. and ad 1).

35. See *Summa theologiae* 1.23.5. In this article, Thomas rejects the notion that 'foreknowledge of merits' is the equivalent of 'predestination'. God does not foresee that one will be good and so decide on that basis to reward that person with eternal life. Rather, our spiritual good is itself the result of God's predestination. Thomas insists that the entire salvific process—running from conversion through good works in grace and perseverance to eternal life itself—falls under God's predestining will. Still, he adds that one part of the salvific process—good works done in grace—is, by the divine ordination, the meritorious occasion of another part of the process, eternal life. Hence, by our merits, made possible by the grace granted to the elect, one can contribute to the attainment of the end set for the person by God.

predestination, the divine ordination furnishes the grace by which the movement to God through our voluntary actions is in fact achieved. Taken in its full range of meanings, the affirmation of the divine ordination as the ground of merit in the first article thus shapes our reading of the subsequent articles on the rewards of merit. Of course, at one level the discussion of merit ascribes great responsibility and dignity to human beings. As aided by God's grace, and dependent on the divine will, we do merit our salvation. But with his talk of ordination Thomas has put the human achievement into its proper context; he shifts the focus to God, to what God has done and why God has provided for human salvation in this particular way. As Thomas states in the second response of the first article of 1–2.114: "What God seeks from our good works is not profit but glory, that is, the manifestation of God's own goodness; this is what God seeks from God's own works too. The reverence we show God is of advantage not to God but to us. And so we merit something from God, not as though God gained any advantage from our works, but inasmuch as we work with a view to God's glory."<sup>36</sup>

### THOMAS'S ORIGINALITY

To this point, my examination of Thomas's teaching about merit has been confined to the Thomistic corpus. By comparing the two principal discussions of merit, it has been possible to discern the distinctive shape of the mature teaching on merit. Locating the question on merit in the *Summa* against the background of Thomas's thought on God's purpose in creating and redeeming, and, especially, on grace, has similarly proved beneficial. Reflection on these related concepts helps us not only to account for the developments in Thomas's teaching about merit but also to grasp the main purpose of Aquinas's affirmation of merit. I wish to conclude this examination by broadening the perspective of the inquiry, to include Thomas's contemporaries. Unable to engage in close readings of these other authors along the lines provided here for Thomas, my concluding

36. *Summa theologiae* 1–2.114.1 ad 2. The translation is by C. Ernst, from the Blackfriars edition of the *Summa* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964–1980), vol. 30.



comments must by necessity remain wholly tentative. Yet, to complete this account of Thomas's teaching on merit, it will be worthwhile to offer some general comments about the distinctiveness of Thomas's approach. To what extent has Aquinas charted his own path in this use of the theological notion of merit to proclaim God?

Aspects of Thomas's mature teaching will, of course, be repeated in other authors. By Thomas's time, merit was a traditional topic in theological treatises, and a general consensus existed on some key points—for example, that by grace it is possible to merit eternal life, and that texts about reward provide the ultimate scriptural justification for affirming merit despite the difficulties associated with this affirmation.<sup>37</sup> But it would appear safe to say that in the *Summa*, Thomas has offered an analysis of merit that differs from all others in the thirteenth century. Although others will approximate discrete features of the Thomistic analysis of merit—I am thinking here, for example, of those who insist on the promise that grounds merit; or, again, of the general recognition of the need for grace for full merit—no one argues as insistently or consistently for the divine contribution in our meriting. The subtlety with which Thomas has approached the question of grace, detecting the need to show the various ways in which grace comes into contact with the human person, has facilitated the construction of what appears to be the most sophisticated treatment of merit in the thirteenth century, a treatment that grants to people their proper role in their salvation while making especially clear the divine role in merit and salvation.

The question of the genesis of this teaching on grace that provides the immediate context of the teaching on merit has proved vexing to students of Aquinas, in particular his introduction of the grace of *auxilium* and the division of it into operative and cooperative *auxilia*. Some have been inclined to ascribe Thomas's new insights on grace to a series of speculative endeavors, in which, for example, Thomas's reflections on the different movements of will led him eventually to distinguish more carefully between the two *auxilia*.<sup>38</sup> Others have explored Thomas's knowledge of the 'tradition', and have suggested

37. For an overview of some thirteenth-century approaches to merit, see Hamm, *Promissio*, pp. 135–312.

38. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, concentrates on Thomas's speculative endeavors, casting only occasional glances at Thomas's work as an historian.

that the changes in Thomas's ideas on grace are due to a greater acquaintance with the tradition, or, to put it more fashionably, are due to the expansion of his repertoire of sources.<sup>39</sup>

For my part, there does not appear to be any good reason to make Thomas's speculative work compete with his historical research. The one complements the other. His speculative gains on will, for example, prepared the way for the fruitful reception of newly discovered theological sources, which in turn reinforced his speculative insights. In this light, the old thesis of Bouillard on the 'Augustinian' contribution to the mature teaching of Aquinas on grace takes on a new attractiveness.

As Bouillard notes, the most significant treatises of the later Augustine (that is, the works that date from after 426) had been lost to the Middle Ages after the Carolingian period. In order to account for Thomas's changed view on conversion—in particular, his different interpretation of the preparation for grace, so that God is responsible for not only the infusion but also the very preparation for grace—Bouillard suggested that Thomas in the early 1260s had rediscovered these late Augustinian works. In reading this Augustine, Thomas would have become sensitive to the 'Massilian' cast of his early account of conversion, and so he would have revised the teaching on conversion to bring it more fully in line with that of the late Augustine.

Bouillard, of course, had been most concerned with the first entry into grace, and so had concentrated on conversion. Yet the late Augustine shows an equal fascination with the grace of perseverance.<sup>40</sup>

39. Bouillard, *Conversion et grâce*, tends to overemphasize the role of Thomas's historical research in the construction of the mature teaching on grace. For Bouillard's discussion of the contribution of such late Augustinian writings as *De praedestinatione sanctorum* and *De dono perseverantiae* to the mature Thomistic doctrine of grace, see pp. 92ff.

40. For an excellent orientation to the main stages of Augustine's thinking about grace, see J. Patout Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1980). According to Burns, Augustine had discovered by 418 an operative grace, tied to predestination, that is responsible for conversion. Only in the writings from 426 on (including *De praedestinatione sanctorum* and *De dono perseverantiae*) did Augustine complete his teaching about grace by insisting on a second operative grace, one responsible for perseverance, that is also tied to predestination.

Once a person has entered the state of grace, why is it that he or she remains in grace despite the constant onslaught of temptation? Augustine replies that God has predestined not only conversion to grace, but perseverance in grace as well, accomplishing both by the transforming grace that is the effect of predestination. In reshaping his teaching on perseverance and on merits (recall what cannot be merited, according to the later Aquinas), Thomas would thus have learned much from Augustine.

Structurally, Thomas' and Augustine's accounts of salvation are remarkably similar. Both ground salvation in God's free decision to save some people, and insist that God works out this salvation through unmerited graces, the graces that Thomas will come to call the operative *auxilia* of conversion and perseverance. Verbal echoes of the late Augustine resonate in the *Summa*. Although the *Summa* possesses, in terms of Bouillard's original statement of his thesis, embarrassingly little that would disclose explicitly the Augustinian roots of the new teaching on conversion, Thomas does cite the late Augustine on the unmerited grace of perseverance.<sup>41</sup> Aquinas has learned from Augustine and made this teaching his own, although he has also been the beneficiary of post-Augustinian reflection on salvation, as with regard to the much fuller description of the possible rewards of merit.

I admit that Bouillard is likely to have been mistaken when he claimed that Thomas was the sole thirteenth-century reader of these late Augustinian treatises. It is in fact probable that Thomas's younger contemporary, the Franciscan Matthew of Aquasparta, read these treatises and read them in their integrity. In Matthew's disputed questions on grace, he quotes these late treatises at great length and clearly has learned from this Augustine to ascribe the beginning as well as the completion of the conversion process to God.<sup>42</sup> But, in

41. See *Summa theologiae* 1–2.109.10 sc. and ad 3.

42. See Bouillard, *Conversion et grâce*, p. 122, n. 126, referring to V. Doucet, editor of Matthew's *Quaestiones Disputatae de Gratia*, BFSMA 11 (Florence, 1935). For his part, Bouillard thinks that Matthew's knowledge of the late Augustine was mediated through Aquinas; given the extent of Matthew's explicit citation of this Augustine in the disputed questions on grace, the denial of a direct reading of Augustine by Matthew appears unfounded. Moreover, Richard H. Rouse has furnished evidence of the availability of Augustine's *De praedestinatione sanctorum* and *De*

comparison to Thomas's assimilation, Matthew's comprehension of the rediscovered Augustine has been only partial.

When it comes to the question of perseverance, Matthew's teaching is wholly traditional, wholly in keeping with those thirteenth-century theologians who had not been exposed to the late works of Augustine. Why does a person persevere? Because of an unmerited gift of God? No, Matthew tells us, perseverance is itself one of the rewards of merit. One stays in grace because one uses correctly the grace that has been received as a gift from God. In other words, probably because he remained more optimistic about human moral capacity, and, at least as is suggested by the disputed questions on grace, because he had not, as Thomas had, seen the need to distinguish carefully among the different movements of will, Matthew does not replicate Thomas's insistence on the prevenience and primacy of God throughout the salvific process. God may start the process, but it is up to the human person to continue the process, staying in grace by good actions and so becoming ever more worthy of God's reward.<sup>43</sup>

The claim with which I began these final observations still holds then. Without denying a human contribution to salvation, the principal focus of Thomas's mature teaching on merit is on God. In the forcefulness with which he makes God the main subject of this teaching, Thomas would seem to stand alone.

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*dono perserverantiae* in Paris in the last quarter of the thirteenth century. See his transcription of a fragment of a catalogue from the Sorbonne library, which he dates to c. 1275, in Mary A. Rouse and Richard H. Rouse, "The Early Library of the Sorbonne," in their *Authentic Witnesses: Approaches to Medieval Texts and Manuscripts* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), p. 401.

43. I have considered Matthew's teaching about grace and perseverance, and limned its continuity with most other thirteenth-century accounts, in my "'Perseverance' in 13th-Century Theology."